Toward a Systemic Ontology

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss whether it is possible to derive a coherent ontological proposal from the premises of systemic thinking. The author claims that systemic thinking is committed to pluralism both in epistemology and in ontology, because pluralism is a natural consequence of the systemic distinction of objects in different and irreducible levels of observation. Different levels of observation must be adopted when describing different systemic levels (the well-known sub-systems, systems, systems of systems). It is implied that different epistemologies are accepted, each having its own criteria and validation methods suitable for each level, and that there are irreducible ontological differences among entities. The study results are thus committed to ontological and epistemological pluralism. An interesting moral and social consequence of pluralism is a tolerant attitude towards different perspectives and cultures, that can easily be transformed into a general charity principle inspiring the regulation of multicultural societies.

KEYWORDS

Epistemology, Interdisciplinarity, Pluralism, System Thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

If the ambition of the systemic approach is to become, to all intents, a new paradigm, able to replace, or integrate within a broader perspective, the analytical and reductionist one - which is still in many ways dominant and, certainly, by far the most widespread - it should prove capable of elaborating a philosophical perspective also with regard to “classical” philosophical problems. Among them ontology has a prominent role, since it establishes the basic reference that other philosophical and scientific branches implicitly or explicitly assume.

The aim of this work is to take the first steps in the elaboration of a systemic ontology, testing its possibilities, its theoretical efficacy, and its limits.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. What is Ontology?

Ontology is, with metaphysics - leaving aside the problem of their distinction - the branch of philosophy that strives to answer the most general and universal question about the world: What there is? The question thus expressed fully corresponds to the etymological meaning of the term “ontology”: reasoned discourse (logos) on what is there (on).

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The problem of what counts as an entity is “the” main problem for most philosophers throughout history, from Plato and Aristotle to our days (just think of recent formal ontology, and of mereology) and, as usual, the answers strictly depend on the conditions of validity established in the premises. The distinction between “revisionary” and “descriptive” metaphysics introduced by P.F. Strawson (1959, pp. 9-12) can be used to make clear this point. Ontologies have two main basic attitudes towards human experience; either they recognize an ontological status to whatever comes into human experience, and in this sense they are “descriptive” ontologies, or they can be “revisionary”, as long as they establish criteria for accepting – and excluding – some piece of experience in - and from - the domain of entities. Descartes and Quine are representatives of the revisionary attitude, while Aristotle is the most ancient and authoritative exponent of the descriptive approach. Leaving to the historians the interesting question of tracking back philosophical genealogies, it is evident even at a first glimpse that systemic thinking belongs to the Aristotelian “descriptive” group, in that it forges instruments of comprehension of “what there is”, without excluding other alternative or complementary criteria (on this delicate point I will be more precise further on).

The conceptual analogies among Aristotelian and systemic ontology are deeper than just being both “descriptive”, and it is worthwhile to track their similarities not for the sake of ennobling the genealogy of systemic thinking, but because systemic thinking shares the basic attitude of the ancient thinker towards human experience: the world, including ourselves, has a sound rational structure traceable in every aspect, object and detail of what there is, that becomes attainable to human comprehension using multiple methods of inquiry.

2.2. Aristotelian Genealogy of Systemic Thought: Substance, Pluralism

I will now select and analyze two fundamental concepts of Aristotelian metaphysics that have significant counterparts in systemic thinking. They are: substance and pluralism.

2.2.1. Substance

The concept of substance and the concept of system share the same comprehension attitude towards the entities that populate human experience, that are to be understood safeguarding their unity, without breaking them into parts or reducing them to disincarnate and formal abstractions, because if we divide an object into parts, the object disappears; on the other end it is also true that an object has parts. How can we solve this prima facie contradiction: an object is composed by many parts, but is one entity? Aristotle is perfectly aware that the relation among a whole and its parts needs to be explained, as the following passage clearly attests: “…now the syllable is not its elements, ba is not the same as b and a, nor is flesh fire and earth (for when these are separated, the wholes, i.e., the flesh and the syllable, no longer exist, but the elements of the syllable exist, and so do fire and earth)” (Metaphysics, VII, 17, 1041 b, 12–31 and passim). Aristotle solution is well known: there is a principle acting as the cause of unification of the elements, “and this is the substance”. How does this principle operate? This question is left unanswered in Aristotle’s thinking, and we must wait many centuries, till systemic thinking manages to perform this further passage pinpointing that the unity of a system is obtained thanks to the organization that connects the parts through bonds of interaction and interference and transforms the many into “one”: a unity, or an object.

Successively, Aristotle observes that those unitary entities, to which the name “substances” applies, maintain their identity even in the flow of changes to which they are subject. How can we explain such dynamics, an apparently contradictory phenomenon, since an entity changes and keeps its identity altogether? To explain the dazzling phenomenon of becoming, Aristotle introduces two new concepts: “potency” and “act”. Substances are in act, but not only in act: they are endowed with a constellation of potentials, the basin of the mutations that a substance can realize. Aristotle does not explain how the potency-act dynamic takes place, and on this point systemic thinking develops the Aristotelian intuition, by specifying that a system can substitute its parts, while the organization generates and sustains systemic properties thanks to the maintaining of coherent states.
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